

## The Art of Reba Lee

*“Fine art is created not to impress anyone—  
fine art is compulsive, inventive and unique—  
it speaks of the human condition and gives no apology.  
It’s an object of exploration, often not divulging its mystery.”*



Glowing with color, vibrating with dramatic contrasts of light and shadow, bursting with lively exhilaration —these are the paintings of Reba Lee. Citing both Neo-Fauvism and Japanese *sumi-e* painting as influences while forging a path of her own, Lee presents landscapes that we recognize with our spirits as well as our eyes, capturing how the land feels as well as how it looks. There is a transcendent awareness in Lee’s vistas—besides being beauty-full, these are also places of energy, potential and abundance. Trees and fields seem to throb with life force, shadows offer palpable coolness, odd-angled old buildings reveal their histories and the lives that have inhabited them. The literary term “magical realism” is apropos to this work: While portraying the land realistically, Lee unveils the magic that dwells there as well. Always, a bold celebratory blast of color carries the visual message: These are places of Life.

Aiming to capture the spirituality of the landscape, Lee’s preferred medium for years was pastel: The soft chalks offer intense, true color, and encourage a rapid, intuitive working method. In 1997, she began adapting her knowledge of color and composition to oil paint. Although the two media may seem diametrically opposed, Lee has brought her sureness of hand and her muscular wide stroke intact to the new medium. With the oils as with the pastels, the physicality of Lee’s broad lines gives her work a three-dimensional quality, a

solidity.

At first glance, we see bold slabs of color; in the next instance, the colors visually compose into form and detail. Meanwhile, the wise use of strong color keeps the viewer's eye in motion, adding to our impression that those clouds are roiling overhead, these trees do move in the wind, this building is pushing its foundation-roots deeper into the soil that supports it.

Based in her nineteenth-century adobe home in southern Colorado, Reba Lee works prolifically. She has centered her life around her artwork. While she speaks eloquently and writes objectively about her craft—"achieving an astonishing, mouth-watering painting depends on careful selection and placement of tonal opposites"—the more subjective sense of spiritual content, of a painting's mystery, is never far away.

Born in Grand Rapids, Minnesota in 1959, Lee was gradually drawn to the American Southwest, her primary residence since 1983. Her path west first took her deeper into the Midwest, where she studied black ink painting—*sumi-e*—with master Shozo Sato at the University of Illinois at Campaign-Urbana. Although Lee's own palette is vividly full spectrum, the sensibilities of *sumi-e* still richly inform her work, appearing both in the range of values she captures within a single brushstroke and in the sense of infectious spontaneity pervasive in her paintings.

"My paintings are like nests—You can feel at home in them," says Lee. This idea of being at home within a landscape is what ties Lee's work to the best tradition of landscape painting: the ability to unite viewer and view in spirit through her art. And people do feel at home in Lee's work: she has shown extensively through the region and is widely collected nationwide. Other than her studies with Sato during her late teens, Reba Lee is a self-taught artist, arriving at her proficiency through extensive observation and experimentation, through hard work. Shozo Sato's lingering *sumi-e* influence quietly slides through Lee's brushwork like the recollection of a recurring musical motif or a half remembered scent, subtle, never overt.

In addition to Sato's inspiration, Lee also voices admiration for Alyce Frank, David Barbero and Paul Shapiro, all painters of the modern New Mexican school who make vivid use of color, which is the clearest point of similarity. But Lee's influences just as clearly point to the *I Ching*—the Chinese *Book of Changes*—which she has been studying for two decades. With its metaphoric use of natural phenomena and locales — strong heaven and yielding earth, arousing thunder and dangerous waters, resting mountains and penetrating winds, light-giving fire and joyful lakes — this ancient Chinese masterpiece provides the spiritual underpainting in Lee's landscape, the *genus loci* made visible. Lee certainly doesn't illustrate the *I Ching* but neither does she document with detached precision the landscape she inhabits. Rather, she finds the joyous heart of the

place, the scene, the shadow and angled sunlight, and then holds this heart just still enough in her pigments that we can see and feel it, too.

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